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Government Policy Around Inclusive Education in the UK and the Implications for Children, Families and Teachers

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Introduction

Recent policy developments in Early Childhood Education (hereafter ECE) in the UK have highlighted concerns around inclusive education that have repeatedly arisen in very different national contexts as social and educational inclusion has become a socio-political and economic priority. Concerns such as, for example, the effect of inclusive education on non-disabled children in the classroom (Sharma & Desai 2002) have been systematically challenged from a poststructuralist perspective (Allan 2008). The objectives for this chapter are, therefore, four fold: firstly, to underline the need for critical literacy when considering policy around inclusive education and explain why a poststructuralist theoretical orientation is so useful in this context; secondly, to identify some key poststructuralist concepts and themes that are relevant to critical analyses of inclusion-related policy developments; thirdly, to outline some of these developments in the UK and, specifically, the newly introduced Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) in which children are assessed as they enter school for the first time in order to make schools accountable for children's progress; and fourthly, to discuss the implications of these policy developments for teachers, families and children.

Poststructuralist thinking

My own policy analyses draw heavily on Foucault (1977, 1982, 1984), Deleuze, (1988, 2004) and Deleuze and Guattari (2004) – French philosopher-theorists whose work was published in English in the 1970s. Derrida (1978) is another key figure in poststructuralist theorising and Slee and Allan (2001) looked to Derrida to explore how policy rhetoric is constructed to promote an assumption that inclusive education has *already* been achieved, even though this is debatable and many issues remain unresolved. Poststructuralists vary in how much emphasis is placed on language but all would agree that this perspective means looking beyond such rhetoric and challenging dominant and normative discourses (where discourse refers to habitual speech and practices that limit the scope of our actions). It means looking beyond taken for granted 'common sense' assumptions about what educational inclusion actually is. Deleuze (2004) invites us to consider what terms like 'disability' *do* rather than focusing on what disability *is*, that is, to explore how language shapes our thinking, attitudes and actions. For Braidotti (2000, 172), this means grasping the positivity of difference rather than engaging in 'categorical' thinking

that erects rigid boundaries between one group and another, and that views children as representatives of a category – ‘the disabled’, thereby failing to see them as unique individuals with unknown potentialities.

Gough (2010) has identified a widespread implicit structuralism in policy and practice-related texts, for example, relating to curricula design. Whereas poststructuralist thinking foregrounds contingent outcomes and context, structuralist assumptions dictate that curricula are presented as ahistorical and non-ideological, and as working towards a pre-specified outcome regardless of context. This type of presentation is also evidenced in commodified remedial programmes that claim to be science-based; the alleged scientific grounding is quite often somewhat dubious (MacNaughton 2004; Rose 1990, 2007) but the impression is given that an outcome is highly likely if the specified steps are faithfully followed. This is an instrumentalist or technicist approach that poststructuralist thinking rejects (Ball 2003; Apple 2005). In the UK, policies around assessment of pupil progress tend to reify a particular version of ‘progress’, that is, they assume a linear and steady process of child development without reference to contextual factors (Bradbury & Robert-Holmes 2016).

Poststructuralist critique facilitates the production of counter discourses or narratives that may influence policy and practice, for example, discourses that are value-driven and privilege caring and compassionate pedagogy over instrumentalism, and that recognise the importance of playful exploration (rather than transmissional whole class teaching) in ECE. The point here is the need to move away from what I have termed, following Deleuze and Guattari (2004), ‘educational hylo-morphism’ (Done, Andrews & Evenden 2018, 2), and what Protevi (2001, 8) terms ‘arche-thinking’. This is the tendency to view children as passive or inert material that can be shaped according to a pre-existing template that is imposed from above. Poststructuralist thinking on ethics permits us to move away from an ‘ethics of competitive individualism’ as the ‘engine of policy making’ (Slee 2019, 1), replacing it with an ethics of inclusivity.

It is a neoliberal system of education that prevails in the UK following public sector reform and the quasi-marketisation of the school system in the 1990s. The accountability procedures that support market functioning have led schools to be data-driven and to an intensive testing culture (Thompson & Cook 2013, 2014). For children with disabilities and / or additional needs, this risks them becoming involved in numerous performance management exercises and quantified assessments of progress (as in national school league tables and remedial programme evaluation). Schools are under great pressure to instil

neoliberal values and aspirations, and respond to a political educational ‘standards’ agenda (Department for Education [DfE] 2016) that, in turn, is linked to a discourse of national competitiveness in the global economy (Ball 2003). An alternative discourse around inclusion would support children to move beyond prescribed expectations linked to disability but without necessarily reflecting economic imperatives. Rather, it would conceive of learning as a self-enriching empowerment (Deleuze 1988) that is achieved with others and yet fosters self-determination (the pursuit of personally relevant goals). It would mobilise a broader concept of achievement that is not confined to formal academic attainment.

Recurring themes

Recurring themes in poststructuralist analyses of UK policy relating to disability include: ironies or contradictions, for example, we regularly see endorsements of professional judgement in policy rhetoric (DfE 2019a) but these are neglected when every aspect of teaching practice is codified in guidance texts directed at teachers (DfE 2014a, 2019b); an insistence that rights are a necessary but not sufficient condition of educational inclusion; the changed nature of caring (now meaning receipt of systematised remedial programmes where progress must be assessed and quantified) (Ball 2003); confused policy landscapes (Done, Andrews & Evenden 2018) as, for example, teachers in ECE are urged to identify diagnosable conditions as early as possible (DfE 2014a) but, simultaneously, urged not to over-identify (DfE 2011); excessive demands on teachers and teacher ‘blaming’ (Thrupp 1998), that is, the suggestion that, with appropriate teacher training, education would become inclusive (regardless of funding constraints and / or wider social obstacles); and tensions between economic and political or ethical rationalities (Done 2020).

My own view is that inclusive education is an ethical issue; it is a matter of socio-political priorities and, as Slee (2019) suggests, the type of society that we want to live in. An economic rationality leads, all too easily, to an ‘economy of worth’ or a ‘binary of worthiness / unworthiness’ (Done, Knowler & Murphy 2015, 93) where efforts are focused on those children who are viewed as having the potential to be economically productive. It means performance management in which academic progress and attainment is prioritised, and commodified remedial programmes that seek to re-engineer behaviour so school data is not compromised. Such programmes are evaluated according to cost-effectiveness, not effectiveness, in efforts to address ‘deficits’ or a slow pace of development. ECE teachers are encouraged to identify such ‘deficits’ as soon as possible to increase the chances of rectification in what Rose (1990) terms ‘technologies of optimisation’. These technologies or

commodified remedial programmes frequently display all of the structuralist features mentioned earlier.

Key Policy Developments

It was Warnock's (1978) historic report where the phrase 'Special Educational Needs and Disabilities' or 'SEND' was coined and the integration of children with SEND into mainstream schools was recommended. In contrast to the segregation of many children in special schools, and the pejorative or negative terminology used to describe them, this was a landmark recommendation. In a neoliberal education system, this is translated into a parent's right to choose the type of school a child attends as enshrined in the Children & Families Act (DfE 2014b). Special school closures followed Warnock's report but attendance at such schools has been increasing steadily in recent years (Done & Andrews 2019; Done & Knowler 2019). Warnock retracted her recommendation in 2005 and others attempted to paint the aspiration to full inclusion as a form radicalism (Powell & Tutt 2002). It is Warnock's (2005) retraction that Allan (2008) systematically critiques and Slee and Allan's (2001) analysis makes it clear that inclusive education is far from being realised. It is not helped by 'opt out' or escape clauses in key legislation such as the Children & Families Act (DfE 2014b) which permits schools to exclude children with disabilities from participation in school activities on cost-efficiency grounds.

Parents who wish to contest discrimination on the grounds of disability are now making use of the Equality Act (TSO 2010) to contest refusal of admission. Ofsted (2019a) refers to ECE settings that cite health and safety regulations when refusing to admit children with disabilities; and my own research (with Helen Knowler of the University of Exeter) suggests that schools are resorting to various 'informal', that is, illegal means to remove children from school where they are perceived as potential liabilities in terms of the school's performance data. The revised SEND Code of Practice (Department of Health and Department for Education [DoH/DfE] 2015), which is statutory guidance for schools based on the Children & Families Act (DfE 2014b), is of little help here. It simply made all teachers responsible for all of the children in their class in the absence of specific advice and in a context of diminishing funding of inclusion in the UK.

Although Ofsted (2019b) has recently revised its school inspection criteria to include indicators of a broad curriculum (one that supports the learning of a broader range of pupils), it relies on academic performance data when deciding which schools to inspect; whilst the market pressures on schools remain the same. Another major review of educational inclusion

is now planned by the government and this announcement has prompted criticism from organisations that think that recommendations from earlier reviews (e.g. Ofsted 2010) should be implemented before ever more reviews are commissioned (Education Policy Institute [EPI] 2019). The Timpson review of school exclusion found that over 40% of fixed term and permanent exclusions are of children with SEND (DfE 2019b) and it identified perverse incentives to exclude prior to calculating school performance for national data.

The RBA (DfE 2014c) is now the single statutory assessment for children immediately after entering ECE. Standardisation here is intended to permit meaningful comparison of school performance nationally. Test scores will be compared to those achieved when a child leaves primary school, and the aim is to create a floor standard that 65% of schools must reach (DfE 2017). Until recently, schools were permitted to choose between 3 such tests and research suggested that the majority of teachers preferred assessment based on teacher observation (Ward 2017). The selection of the new computer-assisted RBA test was based on the view that teachers' judgements lack reliability and validity (DfE 2017). This is ironic given that, in other policy guidance such as the SEND Code of Practice for early year's educators (DE 2014a), it is precisely teachers' judgement that is to be relied on in the early identification of additional needs and/ or disabilities.

Notably, introduction of the RBA follows an Ofsted (2017) report where a more direct whole class transmissional model of teaching is recommended in ECE, contradicting longstanding advice from transnational agencies such as UNESCO (1994) around child-centredness. The recognition that ample opportunities for play are integral to children's learning, not only to their social and psycho-emotional development (Nolan & Paatsch 2018), is also neglected. Of particular concern is Ofsted's (2017) failure to explicitly refer to children with disabilities or special educational needs at any point.

Children who fall behind their peers in terms of academic progress (which is assumed to be a linear and reified process of child development) are very briefly mentioned when Ofsted (2017, 18) seeks to discourage 'new teaching methods', or what Allan (2008) would characterise as pragmatic experimentation by teachers. This implies a de-professionalisation of teaching as teachers are increasingly required to follow prescribed models despite rhetorical commitments to professional autonomy in other policy areas (DfE 2019a). Ofsted (2017) discourages experimentation under the report heading 'Interventions', thus contradicting DfE (2014a) advice that teachers must trial remedial programmes having identified a special need or diagnosable condition.

Implications: teachers

Turning to the implications of government policy, teachers under the latest SEND Code of Practice (DoH/DfE 2015) are responsible for all children in their class while the SEND Coordinator has a more strategic role which includes ensuring an inclusive school ethos; (every UK school is now legally required to have a teacher who coordinates and oversees provision for children classified as ‘SEND’). ECE teachers feel that they require training in diagnosable conditions (Marshall, Ralph & Palmer 2002) despite Florian (2014, 289) and Florian et al. (2004) insisting that teaching methods are the same for children with different needs. There is a sense for some that their teaching role is becoming that of therapist as more children are categorised as having diagnosable ‘social, emotional and mental health’ (SEMH) needs.

My own work also suggests that there are teachers in ECE who are deeply concerned about the impact of pressures to diagnose as early as possible (particularly in a context of inadequate access to external professional support services). Others are similarly concerned about including young children in testing regimes. The latter policy raises questions about the very nature of childhood and child development. Children do not learn or progress at the same pace, and children with conditions such as autism may find the transition to school difficult and perform poorly in the RBA. In my view, children should not be exposed to the potentially negative effects of being labelled as poor performers at a very young age. An educational culture built around economic priorities and intensive testing has already led to a deterioration in the mental health of the school population in the UK and ever younger children are suffering from anxiety and depression. The RBA generates data to assess subsequent school performance and yet approximately 20% of children move school before the end of their primary phase (Sharma 2016); and so, as a measure of school performance, it seems highly problematic. Contextual factors (such as socio-economic deprivation levels in a school’s catchment area) will be omitted from the eventual comparative measure but not the baseline RBA data.

The SEND Code of Practice (DoH/DfE 2015) urges schools to involve parents and this can add to teacher workload and be resource intensive from a school perspective, especially when schools have catchment areas where parents may be reluctant to become involved or ‘hard to reach’ due, for example, to their own negative experiences of schooling (Vincent 2001). The selection and implementation of suitable remedial programmes can be time intensive and support from teaching assistants may be limited.

Wider changes in education suggest a de-professionalisation of teaching with increased reliance on commodified programmes in which teachers simply follow instructions (Apple 2005; Done, Knowler & Murphy 2015). Edwards (2007) makes a similar criticism of the lesson planning required in initial teacher training (ITE) school placements. Trainee or newly qualified teachers tend to rely on their plan in the classroom and when presented with a child that requires some deviation from their plan, they may simply ignore that child, implying a less than inclusive teaching practice. The importance of leadership at school level is clear here. School leaders must develop an inclusive school ethos that supports teachers in their efforts to teach inclusively as well as students (Ainscow & Sandill 2010).

My role brings me into contact with many teachers and very few, to date, say that they received sufficient preparation during their ITE. Florian et al. (2014) encourage what Foucault (1984, 50) would term a ‘critical ontology of ourselves’, that is, opportunities during ITE for trainee teachers to critically consider their own values in relation to inclusion. This poststructuralist insistence on ethical self-scrutiny and practice replaces what MacNaughton (2004) sees as a growing tendency in ECE to claim a scientific (or neuro-scientific) basis to practice, claims often made by those who are not equipped to evaluate original scientific research. Schools that describe themselves as ‘trauma aware’ are responding to government proposals and, perhaps, view the alleged scientificity of commodified remedial programmes as an alternative to gender based ascriptions - the ECE practitioner as the ‘mum at work’ or ‘second mother’. It is important to note that the compassionate pedagogy informed by poststructuralist thinking that is proposed in this chapter is not confined to any one gender.

Implications: families

Turning to families, awareness of family members of their legal rights is crucial but many parents will feel ill-equipped to challenge school decisions or lack the capacity to do so without support (Vincent 2001). There are government-funded advisory services in the UK that can support parents to contest school decisions around refusal of admission or ‘informal’ exclusion through lengthy legal processes; however, funding to such services is being reduced and many parents may not be aware of their availability or, indeed, of their own legal rights.

Where possible, a close relationship with the school may be invaluable as parents and teachers can exchange information about a child. Schools in the UK are encouraged to replace ‘parental involvement’ with ‘parental engagement’ where, instead of an annual visit to the school to discuss a child’s annual progress, parents are proactively involved in, for

example, the setting of targets for their child's learning (as outlined in a child's 'individual education plan' or IEP) (Goodall & Montgomery 2014). Sharing knowledge of their child's condition is important as schools have to decide whether, for example, to apply for an assessment to check whether a child is eligible for an EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan) which results in additional funding for the school. Some schools are organising 'partnership zones' within the school where varied activities that involve parents are intended to present the school as serving its local community school and, indeed, the school *as* a community that includes parents. Parents should support such initiatives and be encouraged to do so.

It is the family that can help challenge stigma and raise a child's self-esteem when poor test performance risks a vicious circle of under-achievement.

Implications: children

The risk for children in intensive testing regimes is that they are subjected to 'educational hylo-morphism' (Done, Andrews & Evenden 2018), being perceived as passive raw material to be engineered or re-engineered according to prescribed outcomes. Uneven paces of development may be interpreted as lack of progress in the RBA and trigger a labelling process which is damaging to a child's self-esteem and, therefore, their future learning (Reay & Wiliam 1999). Any return to more transmissional whole class teaching undermines the child-centred and compassionate pedagogy in which their individuality, or singularity in Deleuze's (2004) terms, is far more likely to be recognised. Appreciation of the uniqueness of every child means that their active contribution to the teaching and learning process can be acknowledged. It also means that difficult behaviours related to an underlying condition are not simply perceived as 'poor behaviour' to be punished. Other sources of 'poor behaviour' should be considered such as the effects of psychological trauma (whether conflict or abuse related).

The privileging of academic attainment within the education system puts children with specific forms of disability or need in the UK at risk of both formal and informal exclusionary practices, including refusal of admission at ECE stage. They continue to be segregated from their peers through practices such as 'part-time timetabling', 'alternative provision' and 'pupil referral units', or the 'velcro' teaching assistant (one to one support which fosters dependency). We are seeing increased levels of home education in the UK and some is described as 'coerced' rather than 'elective' whereby schools persuade parents that their child would benefit from being removed from school (Office of the Schools Adjudicator

[OSA] 2017) when, in fact, the objective is to enhance school performance data (Ofsted 2019a). Children subject to ‘coerced’ home education are unlikely to benefit as many parents are ill-equipped to home educate.

Concluding remarks

It was Foucault (1982, 778) who insisted that we check ‘the type of reality with which we are dealing’ and in the field of inclusive education it is clear that there is a tension between economic and political rationalities – between ways of thinking about, and doing, education and inclusion. If we argue that children with disabilities can, potentially, contribute to national economic capital and a nation’s economic performance in a global economic order, we risk introducing a binary of worthiness / unworthiness where such children are divided from their peers and where those who may never be able to fulfil this objective are de-valued. (Binaries are opposed terms such as able bodied / disabled, productive / non-productive, that are then hierarchically ordered to socially valorise the first term).

Whether so-called ‘special’ schools are needed remains a debated topic in the UK, and the proportion of pupils attending such schools is increasing. In my view, this is due, in part, to the increasingly competitive culture and pressures now found in mainstream education that are associated with quasi-marketisation; it seems likely that some parents may wish to protect their children from such pressures. The confused policy landscape that is evidenced in the UK is also a factor.

Efforts to standardise, associated with performance monitoring and comparison, neglect the individuality of children and their contribution to the teaching and learning process. Teachers are now also subject to hylo-morphism; hence, the UK government’s guidance for ECE promotes an assumption that confidence-building skills training is all that is needed to ensure inclusive education rather than a wider shift in social values and socio-political priorities. Caring has become a matter of delivering commodified remedial programmes and quantifying their effectiveness, reducing children to data-producers and transforming the nature of caring (Ball 2003). The UK government has recently proposed training in trauma for teachers (DfE 2019a) but continues to pursue a political academic ‘standards’ agenda which places schools under pressure to deliver ever higher levels of formal academic attainment.

To summarise, ECE in the UK is at risk of functioning as the training ground for entry into an educational system in which teachers are charged with raising the performance of their school whilst also delivering inclusivity. Policy discourse and political rhetoric in the

UK which suggest that these two agendas take equal priority are highly misleading and much remains to be done to ensure an inclusive educational experience for all children.

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